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Photo: UNHCR/Felipe Concha

# AFGHAN REFUGEE WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT: Systematization, Best Practices, and Recommendations

## Executive Summary

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WOMEN



UN Women is committed to ensuring equality between men and women as partners and beneficiaries of humanitarian action. UN Women supports other United Nations organizations in its humanitarian efforts through its inter-institutional coordination and leadership role in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. It fulfils its humanitarian function by providing coordination, leadership, technical expertise, skills development, and evidence-based responses.

UN Women's Second Chance Education Programme provides a comprehensive solution for women who have not completed their formal education and are in a vulnerable situation in terms of employment and job opportunities. UN Women, in partnership with the BHP Foundation, implement this initiative in six countries: Cameroon, Jordan, India, Mexico, Australia, and Chile. Through public and private cooperation, it develops a sustainable system for women's empowerment at the local, national, and global levels, which promotes formal education, employment, and entrepreneurship.

Through the Second Chance Education Programme, UN Women Chile has developed an initiative for Afghan refugee women's economic empowerment and social integration<sup>1</sup>. This initiative was possible due to the inter-agency collaboration with UNHCR and ECLAC and the support of the *Fundación Instituto de Cultura Afgana-Chilena* (Afghan Chilean Culture Institute Foundation) and the Ascend Athletics Foundation.

The systematization of this initiative allowed examining the theoretical and methodological approaches used, identifying best practices and lessons learned to consider in future interventions that provide comprehensive support to refugee women. This document is an extract of its main points.

1. Initiative funded with the contribution of the Silicon Soccer Corporation.

# THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND CONTEXT

## Refugee Women's Economic Empowerment

Specialized literature has identified several barriers to refugee women's economic empowerment. Recent research work by Kabir & Klugman (2019) on salary and labour gaps faced by refugee women suggests the following main causes:

- Gender occupational segregation that keeps women in unqualified, informal, and poorly paid sectors of the economy.
- Crossing of inequalities and discriminatory social norms at home and in society in general.
- Legal barriers to participation of the displaced populations in the labour market.
- Lower access to social and business networks.
- Lack of resources to promote the economic empowerment of women in crises.

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## **Key Factors In Economic Empowerment Programmes For Refugee Women**

Academic and technical literature highlights several key factors influencing the success of economic empowerment interventions and programmes for migrant and refugee women.

- A comprehensive and holistic approach that addresses the different dimensions of economic empowerment, including job training, access to funding, business support, and the promotion of female leadership (ILO, 2017; UN Women, 2019).
- Significant and active participation of refugee women in the programmes' planning, implementation, and monitoring.
- The creation of partnerships and collaborations between different actors such as governments, civil society organizations, the private sector, and host communities to create synergies, resources, and knowledge and facilitate the creation of a favourable environment for refugee women's economic empowerment (IOM, 2020; UNHCR, 2018).
- The adaptation and contextualization of the interventions to the specific realities of refugee women, such as their legal, socioeconomic, and cultural situation, and the particular characteristics of each context (ILO, 2017; UN Women, 2019).

## **Socio-Emotional Aspects Considered In Refugee Women's Empowerment Programmes**

The inclusion of refugee women in the workplace can be influenced by socioeconomic variables that must be considered.

- Trauma and stress related to forced displacement and the experience of being a refugee can impact women's mental and emotional health, affecting their ability to look for a job and perform in the workplace (De Vroome and Van Tubergen, 2010). Therefore, it may be necessary to provide emotional and psychological support to overcome these barriers.
- Cultural and linguistic integration is important for the success of refugee women in the workplace (Sharifian et al., 2020.) This implies providing training that promotes their autonomy and independence.
- Gender discrimination can be a problem in the workplace, especially if refugee women come from cultures with traditional gender roles like Afghanistan (Sharifian et al. 2020.) Awareness-raising may be necessary at the workplace to ensure that refugee women have the same opportunities and are treated fairly and equally.
- The lack of social networks and community support can also be a challenge for refugee women in the workplace (Gettliffe and Khan, 2020). It is important to establish support networks to help refugee women connect with other workers and build relationships in the community.

An attentive approach to nuances is vital to overcome the stereotypes and stigma against the women affected by displacement. Due to the above, the specific context experienced by Afghan refugee women must be understood, identifying the challenges and barriers they face.

## MIGRATORY CONTEXT

After 40 years of war and a situation marked by economic decline and rising poverty levels, the Afghan people faced an increased conflict after the withdrawal of international forces and the Taliban takeover in 2021. As a result, there are estimated to be more than 2.6 million Afghan refugees worldwide, and approximately 80% are women and children (UNHCR, 2021).

Afghan women and girls are the most affected by the new regime. There are serious concerns regarding women's rights setbacks and the restrictions to their participation in life and society, with impositions on education, the right to work, and free movement (OCHA, 2022).

Due to this, Afghan women face an extremely adverse reality for their economic empowerment and general well-being, which has led to massive migration. A few women have arrived in Latin America, where at least 29 have been reported to be in the Chilean territory and have participated in the UN Women Chile Second Chance Education programme.



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## PROCESSES DEVELOPED IN THE PROGRAMME

The work of UN Women Chile with the women from Afghanistan started in March 2022. The intervention was designed based on a characterization survey, where the language barrier was identified as a key obstacle to social integration in Chile, exercising their rights, and finding economic sources to address their needs. The initiative aimed to support women to address these barriers and the information gaps that hinder their economic empowerment through different components.

## COMPONENTS OF THE INITIATIVE

- An introductory Spanish course implemented by ECLAC to facilitate their social and cultural integration in the host country. 25 Afghan women participated actively in the course, and 16 graduated successfully, obtaining a basic Spanish-level certification (A1) after completing 45 hours of classes. 10 women graduated from an A1.2 or A.2 level course. Both groups connected via WhatsApp and built an important support network during the entire learning process considering the different components of the initiative.
- In-person legal advice sessions implemented in partnership with UNHCR, where 19 participants and their families connected to the Chilean social protection network and received information on their migratory status.
- Digital skills training is offered to improve the integration of the participants through the use of technology tools. 9 women successfully completed the course, acquiring digital competencies to look for jobs and to work in Chile.
- Free advice and personalized assistance for labour insertion. It included support to redefine work objectives, create a CV, job-seeking strategies, and preparation for job interviews for 14 participants. In parallel, an awareness-raising strategy was developed with potential employers to highlight the benefits of hiring refugee women.

When analysing the key factors for the success of economic empowerment programmes for migrant and refugee women in this initiative, it was proven that the work was done with a **comprehensive and holistic approach**, addressing the different dimensions of economic empowerment, including strategies to overcome language and digital barriers and support in labour insertion.

The intervention was implemented with a **gender perspective and personalized support**. This was achieved through individualized support from socio-labour workers and facilitators who adapted to each participant's needs and Spanish language level. The aim was to establish close ties and generate spaces for support and listening. Nevertheless, there were significant challenges related to language and cultural barriers, the user's low level of participation, and the socio-emotional difficulties that affected labour insertion.

The **creation of partnerships and collaborations** with different organizations, such as the Ascend Athletics Foundation and UNHCR, to contact Afghan women and obtain support in the implementation process and the collaboration with Fundación Emplea to provide career counselling and establish contacts with companies interested in employing the participants were key for the initiative.

From the private sector, collaboration was established with Microsoft to offer digital literacy courses. The work with civil society organizations and the Government led to an intersectoral round table for the social action of refugees working on relevant public policies.

Within the framework of this systematization, relevant actions for a comprehensive intervention in 5 large dimensions were identified.



## **Economic**

They are related to the economic factors that may affect refugee women's participation and achieving their goals. Some economic factors to be considered are the access or barriers to job opportunities, such as the lack of work experience in the new country, the lack of recognition of their skills and qualifications, employment discrimination, access to financial services, access to entrepreneurship funds, knowledge of labour rights, work training, and financial support.



## **Psycho-Emotional**

According to the literature, some key psycho-emotional factors to consider are trauma and the mental health of migrant women, adaptation stress, self-esteem and empowerment, cultural identity, belonging, and self-expression. Some actions to facilitate the process in the psycho-social aspect are developing programmes that promote access to well-being activities (mindfulness, sports, etc.), addressing mental health with professionals in severe cases, developing religious spirituality, peer mentoring for well-being, leadership workshops to promote entrepreneurship and social participation and promoting self-knowledge and self-efficacy.



## **Institutional**

They are related to the support to regularize their migratory situation, to validate or accredit studies, favour a fluent bond with government institutions that ensure access to education, health, housing, and justice, promote a positive immigration climate and the existence of laws against discrimination and equal opportunities based on gender, and nationality, among others.



## **Pedagogical**

They are related to pedagogical approaches used in refugee women empowerment programmes. Creating a culturally responsible pedagogy is required (Sleeter, 2011), where the teaching and learning processes adapt to the cultural characteristics of migrant women, considering their norms, values, and traditions. In addition, the principles of adult learning, intercultural education, and trauma-informed pedagogy must be taken as a basis. The latter implies creating safe spaces, strengthening resilience, avoiding re-traumatization, and offering proper emotional and psycho-social support. Training the staff who interact with the participants on this approach will help them understand the effects of trauma, use trauma-informed approaches, and identify signs of distress or reactions to trauma.



## **Sociocultural**

In the literature, it is considered vital to consider sociocultural factors such as language barriers, cultural norms, and gender roles in their countries of origin, religion, and spirituality, as well as community networks and social support. Some facilitating actions in this aspect include strategies to learn the language of the host country, address gender issues and the prevention of violence, increase contact and support networks, development of cultural competencies through social devices, and immigrant culture awareness-raising spaces for employers and colleagues.





## LESSONS LEARNED AND BEST PRACTICES

- Cultural awareness and personalized interventions to understand and adapt to the needs and cultural context of the participants.
- Strengthening community networks, since collaborating with representatives from the Afghan community and other organizations was a valuable partnership to create a more significant impact.
- Having relevant and updated data to understand the needs and characteristics of the participants.
- Flexibility and continuous adaptation in the programme's interventions based on needs and contingencies.
- Developing and strengthening intersectoral collaborative partnerships to access more resources and support for the participants and extend the reach of the programme.
- Generate a comprehensive approach to address the participants' needs and support them in developing crucial skills for economic empowerment. This is particularly relevant regarding including psycho-emotional support in the programme's design.
- Considering socio-emotional support from professionals with the proper tools and psychological experience. This is especially difficult when the cultural and language barriers are high; thus, it becomes important to consider several strategies.
- It is necessary to consider that, in some cases, participants are in contexts of violence. The support provided must consider this situation.
- It is important to move towards a State-led strategy to address the needs of refugees.

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